

Chapter 3

Psychiatric Disabilities

A. Overview

Accommodations for students with psychiatric disabilities can vary greatly depending on the type and severity of each disability. In some cases, accommodations aren't even warranted.

Students may feel a stigma associated with their psychiatric disability and believe that you and their classmates would not understand their need for accommodations.

Disability service providers at most campuses have noticed an increase in the number of students with psychiatric disabilities who have registered with their office. The increase has been attributed to several different factors.

- Side effects of medications are not as limiting as they once were, allowing people to function in a college setting.
- There is more awareness in our society that people with psychiatric disabilities can be productive and attend school full time.
- Students with psychiatric disabilities are starting to feel as if they fit in more on campus.

While colleges are becoming more comfortable with learning disability accommodations, the same cannot be said of psychiatric disabilities. Many professors and students are fearful that these students may be dangerous. While this is not so in the vast majority of cases, the perception can further isolate those who tell others of their psychiatric disability. You need to understand how psychiatric disabilities can interfere with learning. While no two individuals with psychiatric disabilities are the same, the possible characteristics below can give you some insights on this.

Possible student characteristics

- Test-taking anxiety.
- Distracted easily.
- Problems with concentration.
- Drowsiness.
- Problems with attendance.
- Trouble meeting due dates.
- Trouble keeping appointments.
- Difficulty dealing with social situations.
- Trouble maintaining stamina.
- Difficulty dealing with stress.
- Difficulty dealing with new situations.

Possible accommodations

Decisions as to appropriate accommodations should be made on a case-by-case basis. No particular accommodations are appropriate for all students, particularly since the types of psychiatric disabilities are far-ranging. But below are some common ones offered:

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Classroom

- Preferential seating.
- Having classmate as a volunteer assistant.
- Pre-arranged classroom breaks.
- Note-taker.
- Tape recorder.

Examinations

- Changes in test format (e.g., multiple choice to essay).
- Extended time.
- Allowing exams to be individually proctored, including in the hospital.
- Distraction-reduced setting.
- Use of computer software programs.
- Allowing exams to be read orally, dictated, scribed or typed.

Assignments

- Substitute assignments.
- Advance notice of assignments.
- Allow assignments to be handwritten, rather than typed.
- Allow assignment assistance during hospitalization.
- Use alternative forms for students to demonstrate course mastery.
- Text books on tape.